



# THE ALPENA NEWS

## Murch: Hope and promise for better school days

By STEVE MURCH

According to Wednesday's Traverse City Record-Eagle, a group of concerned boosters for the Northport school district in Leelanau County are trying to develop Northport Promise, a plan similar to Kalamazoo Promise which pays for college tuition and fees for four years to graduates from Kalamazoo Public Schools. Northport is trying to keep its enrollment from falling any further — 153 students, down from 309 just 10 years ago.

According to the newspaper, projections show the enrollment figures will continue to drop. There apparently have been talks about closing the school and moving students into nearby districts. For Northport, that likely would mean students going to Suttons Bay, though some might go to Lake Leelanau St. Mary.

Those enrollment figures are similar to some schools around here, though the drop over the last 10 years isn't. It shows you how difficult it is for schools to operate with fewer students.

Imagine the impact on the town if Hillman, Atlanta or Posen had to close their doors. It makes you empathize with the folks in Northport. The three small local schools, however, haven't seen the drastic drop in enrollment like Northport. Still, it can be an eye-opener.

It appears in the case of Northport, dwindling enrollment is the biggest issue. In schools big and small in Northeast Michigan, funding is the issue.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm presented her budget Thursday, and in it she proposes a \$178 per-student increase for K-12 schools. There also will be incentives for schools that consolidate some services at the county or regional level.

The key to the entire Granholm budget plan is the implementation of a sales tax on services, with some exceptions. According to the Associated Press on Friday, the governor wants to put the plan in place by June 1 so the state can raise enough money to avoid a per-student shortfall in the school aid fund of \$220, which would force schools to cut costs this year.

Area schools have been cautious the last several years when developing and implementing budgets. The per-student increases haven't been as large as hoped in years past, so schools have learned not to count on the additional funding. Any increase would be a windfall.

Ask anyone associated with Atlanta, Hillman and Posen schools (and I only use those three because they are the smallest in the area) and you could almost guarantee they would fight to the end to keep their school open rather than close their doors. Consolidating services might be something they would consider. In fact, all three have investigated aspects of consolidating services in the past.

A school system is important to any community, but it has a larger presence in small

communities. It gives a community an identity and a common bond among residents regardless of social or economic status. School pride, though alive and well in larger schools, is almost a birth right in small communities.

School events — band concerts, sporting events, etc. — are a social gathering in small communities. If you don't have a child participating, chances are you have a relative or neighbor who does. And more often than not, you are going to attend the event to show your support.

That's why school fund-raisers at small schools never seem to fail — a large percent of the community is directly invested in the schools. And an army of volunteers ready to charge into any fund-raiser is easy to round up.

That is what makes news of a potential school closing the hardest — the effect on the community. If a small town loses a school, it loses a centerpiece of the community, a missing piece of community pride.

You have to root for the success of a possible Northport Promise so the school avoids closing its doors. Adding a Promise to a local school would be extraordinary for everyone involved.

And you pray that staring down a school closing never comes to school near here.